DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 536 CS 213 429

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TITLE How Teacher Opinions about Writing Instruction Correspond with Student Attitudes about Writing.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 20p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; *Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Response; Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; Theory Practice Relationship; Writing Apprehension; *Writing Instruction; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Composition Theory; Student Surveys; Teacher Surveys

ABSTRACT

The personal attitudes of a writing instructor are often much more important than the pedagogical orientation, and certain teacher attitudes seem to affect student performance and attitude more than others. Research on writing apprehension shows a correlation between attitude and writing. Several theorists have postulated that the sources of students' attitudinal obstacles can be traced to the teacher's actions. However, the answer to the question, "Which teacher opinions have the greatest effects?", is a little more elusive. To explore this question, a correlational study was undertaken. Based on data collected at a small liberal arts college during a fall semester, changes in both student and teacher attitude were compared. A total of 121 students, 23 from basic writing and 98 from composition, took both entrance and exit attitude surveys. Scores from all seven sections improved as the semester progressed. In addition, the six faculty members (one teacher taught two sections) responded to an opinionnaire. In three of four areas measured, the correlation between teacher and student attitude occurred regularly. These findings suggest that certain attitudes, such as concern with individual writers' development, an understanding of the flexibility of language, and a desire to de-emphasize grades, rules, and rigid formats, facilitate better student attitudes. (Four tables are included; 17 references are attached; and samples of the Reigstad and McAndrew "Writing Attitude Scale" and the Gere, Schuessler and Abbott "Composition Opinionnaire" used in the study are appended.) (HB)

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How Teacher Opinions about Writing Instruction Correspond with Student Attitudes about Writing

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How Teacher Opinions about Writing Instruction
Correspond with Student Attitudes about Writing

For a couple of years now, I've been trying to nail down an intuitive perception: student writers' performance and attitudes change because of how we teach and believe, not because of which teaching and composition theories we practice or support. This certainly seems true in my own case: whether I emphasize classical rhetoric or new, product or process, grammar or free writing, my personal attitudes seem more important than my pedagogical orientation, and certain of my teacher attitudes seem to affect my students more than others.

But I began to wonder if my perceptions could be backed up, so I developed three questions I wanted to explore. First, do student writers' attitudes make any difference? In researching this question, I found that literature on writing apprehension shows a correlation between attitude and writing (process and product).

Second, are students' attitudes about writing affected by writing teachers' opinions about teaching writing? The answer, I think, is an unqualified "yes."

The third question--which teacher attitudes have the greatest positive and negative effects?--is considerably more complex, but it is at the root of what successes teachers have in writing classes.

Does Attitude Affect Writing?

My first question--are students' attitudes toward writing

evident in their writing processes and their written products?--must be answered affirmatively. Several studies have demonstrated this correlation between attitude and performance.

Because comprehensive discussions of the field already exist (see Daly's "Writing Apprehension"), I provide only a succinct overview. Research indicates that we can be fairly certain that student writers with high apprehension and/or bad attitudes about writing exhibit certain behaviors which manifest themselves as restricted writing processes and as reduced textual complexity and quality.

Highly apprehensive writers have been shown to have communication and test anxiety, low expectations and confidence, rigid rules for dealing with writing tasks, and writing avoidance tendencies when choosing careers and courses (McAndrew and Williamson 44). Their poor attitudes toward writing are merely extensions of their fears, lack of self confidence, and inflexibility.

In addition, students' writing apprehension correlates significantly with the quality and fluency of their written products. Students with lower apprehension write more fluently, producing more words, sentences, and paragraphs (Book), and they perform better in spelling, punctuation, modification, fragment recognition, and diction (Daly, "Writing Apprehension and Writing Competency"). Further, the writing of high apprehensive has been shown to be of lower overall quality (Garcia).

In addition to the written product, the writing process also

relates to an apprehensive attitude. Selfe, for example, reports that high apprehensive engage in little written pre-work, do less planning, and do little editing and revising. Low apprehensive, however, elongate their planning time (Bannister). Further, highly apprehensive writers also demonstrate rigid, inflexible heuristic procedures which actually contribute to their poor writing attitudes (Rose)[1].

Do Teacher's Opinions Affect Students' Attitudes?

Several theorists have postulated that the sources of students' attitudinal obstacles can be traced to teacher's action. Smith, for example, condemns the threatening aspects of responses to writing. And Daly ("The Effects of Writing Apprehension . . .") believes that a history of negative, red-inked responses to writing probably causes much apprehension. Many possible reasons directly connect to teacher practices: authoritarian readers, aversive conditioning, evaluation fears, rigid rules, process unawareness, teacher-centered teaching, and problems in neurolinguistic processing (Holladay).

One notable examination of attitude interaction, a case study of three basic writers, clearly states that "these students' attitudes toward writing were shaped to a great extent by their teacher's attitudes" (Gay 4). Further, Gay's study "revealed that students' beliefs about writing . . . are shaped . . . by their teachers' beliefs about writing " (10). To Gay's subjects, the purpose of writing was to please teachers and to obtain grades by

achieving correctness according to a teacher's constraints of time, process, and length.

It follows, then, that the answer to my second question--do writing teachers' opinions affect their students' attitudes?--is certainly affirmative. Since teachers' own apprehension carries over to their students (Gere, Schuessler, and Abbott), then it seems reasonable that teachers, by stressing various areas of composition--particularly when the emphasis is manifest in red-inked, negative responses to writing--also affect their students' attitudes.

Which Teacher Opinions Have the Greatest Effects?

The literature on writing attitudes provided probable answers to my first two questions. Yes, student writers' attitudes are likely to be manifest in their writing processes and written products. And yes, students' attitudes toward writing are likely to be affected by teachers' attitudes toward writing instruction. However, the answer to my third question--which teacher opinions have the greatest effects?--is a little more elusive.

Obviously, the answer to such a multi-variate question--which teacher attitudes have the greatest positive and negative effects on their students--is sprawling and difficult. We're talking about a plethora of teachers, each of whom exhibits a quite personal and unique array of approaches and attitudes. And each of those teachers might produce entirely different attitudinal effects within a single class of students, each of whom already carries an

attitude toward writing which the teacher in turn alters.

To explore this multi-faceted, problematic question, I used a correlational study, itself something of an unusual item, but I decided on it after considering several research options and recognizing the correlational study's contributional value[2]. To explore the correlation between student and teacher attitudes I looked at the composition courses and instructors in one small college. I recorded changes in student writers' attitudes over the semester and collected instructors' attitudes about teaching composition. I then compared teacher opinions to the changes in students' attitudes within each writing course. The comparison provides a description of which types of teacher opinion have the greatest correlation with improvement in students' attitudes toward writing.

I collected data at a small liberal arts college during the fall semester. The college offered both an honors program for advanced students and a counseling/tutoring program for under-prepared students. Enrollees in all first-year writing courses--two sections of basic writing and six sections of English composition, one an honors section--were given Reigstad and McAndrew's "Writing Attitude Survey" (see appendix A). The scale include 20 statements which students respond to on a Likert-type system. Scoring the responses to the positive and negative statements produces a numerical representation of the students' attitudes, ranging from -40 to +40, higher scores representing better attitudes, zero representing a neutral attitude.

Since all students were given the survey, controlled participant selection was unnecessary. The students completed the scale immediately at the beginning of the first class meeting, before being affected through teacher interaction. Students again completed the scale during the last class meeting of the semester, but one section of English composition was not included in the exit scores when the instructor withdrew her cooperation. A total of 121 students, 23 from basic writing and 98 from composition, took both the entrance and the exit surveys.

Students' attitude ratings, from both the beginning and ending of the semester, were tabulated individually and by section, and those results are shown in Table 1, arranged by percentage increase in the classes' scores.

Prof.		N=	Sept. Mean	Dec. Mean	percent increase	number improving
A	Section 1 (BW)	14	8.14	8.79	8	7
B	Section 2	25	8.08	11.21	39	15
C	Section 3	18	9.01	13.39	49	13
D	Section 4 (H)	11	9.73	18.18	87	8
E	Section 5	23	5.35	11.57	116	15
F	Section 6 (BW)	9	4.33	11.22	159	6
G	Section 7	21	2.05	12.43	506	18
	Totals	121	6.53	11.55	77	82

Figure 1: Entering and exiting mean scores by writing section on the Writing Attitude Survey, indicating attitude changes.

The column headed "Sept. Mean" indicates the beginning scores of the students; the higher the score, the better the students' attitudes at the beginning of the fall semester. The mean scores of all sections (6.53) indicates that most students began the

semester with a mildly positive attitude toward writing. The column headed "Dec. Mean" indicates the scores at the end of the semester. The mean scores of all sections improved, showing an overall attitude improvement (to 11.55). The column headed "percent increase" indicates how much the mean scores for that section improved over the semester, and each section showed at least some attitude improvement, ranging from an 8% increase (Section 1) to a 506% increase (Section 7). The last column on the right indicates the number of students in each section whose attitudes improved. At least 50% of the students in each section showed an improved attitude, and overall 68% of students left composition class with improved attitudes toward writing. Sections 1 and 6 represent the basic writing sections, and Section 4 the honors sections. Sections 5 and 6 were taught by the same instructor, Professor E; all other sections were taught by different instructors.

In addition to administering the WAS, the six faculty members responded to Gere, Schuessler, and Abbott's "Composition Opinionnaire" (Appendix B). The Opinionnaire consists of four, ten-statement sections designed to elicit the respondents' attitudes toward four areas of composition instruction: the important of standard English usage; the importance of defining and evaluating tasks; the importance of student self-expression; and the importance of linguistic maturity. The Opinionnaires were scored using the method described in the Gere study: the items were responded to on a numbered Likert-type scale, and the scores were

then added, the responses to some questions being reversed as indicated in Appendix B. The results of the instructors' responses to the Composition Opinionnaire are given in Table 2.

Prof	Standard English	Defining Tasks	Self Expression	Linguistic Maturity
A	25	25	39	40
B	33	33	27	38
C	22	30	31	34
D	17	21	32	36
E	12	11	44	32
F	18	14	34	29
Mean	21.2	22.3	34.5	34.8

Table 2: Individual and mean scores on the Composition Opinionnaire by the four topic sub-groups.

In Table 2, those professors whose students showed the least attitude improvement are at the top of the table; those whose students showed the most improvement are at the bottom of the table. Column two shows the scores on "The Importance of Standard English in the Instruction of Written Composition" section of the opinionnaire. Column three represents "The importance of Defining and Evaluating Writing Tasks," column four "The Importance of Student Self Expression," and column five "The Importance of Linguistic Maturity."

The teachers represented a diverse group. Professor A, a full-time instructor in the education department, also taught basic reading and writing courses. Professor B, had a full-time, dual appointment in English and physical education. Professor C was a part-time instructor of composition, public speaking, and creative

writing. Professor D, an associate professor of English, specialized in Elizabethan literature. Professor E was an assistant professor with special training in composition. Professor D, a full professor of English, had completed a doctorate in education. Professor A and F were women. Professors D and F had completed doctorates. Professor F had the most experience, Professor B the least.

As shown in Table 3, the mean scores from the six faculty in this study compare closely to the mean scores of the university professors Gere, Schuessler, and Abbott surveyed in their validation study. Therefore, the professors' opinions in this study are not unique, comparing closely with professors in the original study.

	Standard English	Defining Tasks	Self Expression	Linguistic Maturity
Mean Scores This Study	21.2	22.3	34.5	34.8
Mean Scores Gere, Schuessler, and Abbott	19.4	22.0	32.5	39.1

Table 3: Comparison of mean scores on the Composition Opinionnaire

In order to compare class improvement on the Writing Attitude Survey with teacher scores on the Composition Opinionnaires, I calculated correlations between each teacher's score on the Opinionnaire categories and the corresponding class's change in writing attitude. Those correlations are provided in Table 4.

comparison	correlation
attitude--importance of standard English	-.64
attitude--importance of task definition	-.64
attitude--importance of self expression	-.02
attitude--importance of linguistic maturity	-.79

Table 4: correlations between class attitude improvement and teacher opinions on section of the Composition Opinionnaire

For three of the four areas measured by the Opinionnaire, the correlation between the teacher's attitude and the students' attitudes occurs regularly enough that it can not be explained by coincidence. Therefore, a statistically significant correlation exists between teachers' attitudes about the importance of standard English, task definition, and linguistic maturity and their students' improvements in attitudes about writing. In the fourth area, comparing the class's attitude improvement with the teacher's opinions about the importance of self expression, virtually no correlation is shown. When professors score low on the statements supporting the importance of standard English, the importance of task definition and evaluation, and the importance of linguistic maturity in composition instruction, their students tend to show a correspondingly high improvement in writing attitudes. Conversely, when professors score high in those categories, their classes show less attitude improvement.

We can sketch those professors by profiling their responses to certain items on the Opinionnaire (Appendix B). Instructors who would score low on the "Importance of Standard English" scale would tend to disagree with all questions except number ten. Such

persons, then, would accept the personalization of writing and grammatical flexibility in their students' writing. Lower-scoring professors on the "importance of Task Definition and Evaluation" scale would tend to disagree with questions one through nine. Such persons would probably emphasize the personal and rhetorical aspects of writing, de-emphasizing grades and evaluative comments. Finally, lower-scoring professors on the "Importance of Linguistic Maturity" would tend to disagree with all questions. Such persons would probably work to facilitate students' self-actualization and freedom rather than their linguistic sophistication.

Therefore, instructors whose students show more attitude improvement are likely to demonstrate the following traits:

>>they display concern with individual writer's personal and intellectual development;

>>they emphasize the flexibility of language's ability to deal with rhetorical situations;

>>they de-emphasize grades, rules, and rigid formats.

These teachers, in fact, work directly to counteract the traits Rose associated with blocked writers.

Attitude-restricting instructors, on the other hand, are concerned with adhering to rigid rules of usage, mechanics, and form, and they are convinced of the importance of grades as an evaluation tool as well as the relevance of their own teaching.

What Does It All Mean?

Obviously, some correspondence can be drawn between teacher's opinions about writing instruction and their students' attitudes toward writing. This study does not, however, prove that the teachers' opinions directly affected the changes in the students' attitudes; it shows only that the two coexist at a more-than-coincidence rate.

But I also think the project has provided at least somewhat clear answers for my original questions. **First**, as the literature review indicates, students' writing attitudes are manifest in their written products and in the writing processes. **Second**, I think some relationship clearly exists between the attitudes a particular teacher brings to her classrooms and the attitude adjustments students in that classroom make. **Third**, I have strong reason to suspect that certain teacher attitudes--a concern with the individual writers' personal and intellectual development, an understanding of the flexibility of language, a desire to de-emphasize grades, rules, and rigid formats--facilitate better student attitudes.

Along with these possible answers, the study also suggests several questions. For one, the mean student attitudes improved in all classrooms. While certain teacher opinions corresponded to greater improvement in students' attitudes, the absence of those opinions did not correspond to worsening attitudes. Perhaps this indicates that the act of writing itself, composing for a responsive reader, might account for at least some of the changes

in the students' attitudes. Future studies might explore this area.

For another, the study only examined the correlation for one variable, teacher opinions. Perhaps the number or nature of writing tasks would also show a positive correlation. Perhaps the amount and nature of teacher comments would also correlate. Perhaps--and common sense tells me this is probably true--teachers' opinions about writing correlate with the nature of writing tasks and teacher comments, so that all three work together. Future studies might address these areas.

Correlational studies like this one can only hope to contribute to our growing understanding of the relationship between writing teachers' opinions and their relationship to student writers' attitudes. This information is, however, a provocative step in establishing a connection between teachers' attitudes and their abilities to help students become less apprehensive, more confident writers.

Notes

[1]I must point out that correlational studies do not establish cause-effect relationships. They demonstrate that events happen together at a rate which cannot be explained by chance, but the studies do not prove that one event caused the other to happen.

[2]Much work in composition has relied on the techniques of cognitive psychology--Flower and Hayes's efforts remain a prime example--but as others have noted (Cooper, for example), such research tends to place its subjects in vacuums, removing them from social situations; my opinion-affects-attitude question depends on just such social interaction. Other researchers--Heath is the best example--have relied on ethnographic research, but such an approach seems to work best when studying relatively stable cultures. Since the social situation I'm considering, writing classrooms, is necessarily short lived, I didn't think ethnography was the best method.

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Appendix A
Writing Attitude Scale

There are no right or wrong responses to the following statements about writing. Please indicate as honestly as possible how you feel about each statement on the scale provided. One shows strong disagreement with the statement, three an uncertainty, and five a strong agreement.

1 2 3 4 5 1. I look forward to writing down my own ideas.

1 2 3 4 5 2. I have no fear of my writing being evaluated.

1 2 3 4 5 3. I hate writing.

1 2 3 4 5 4. If I have something to say I would rather write it than say it.

1 2 3 4 5 5. I am afraid of writing when I know what I write will be evaluated.

1 2 3 4 5 6. My mind usually seems to go blank when I start to work on a composition.

1 2 3 4 5 7. Expressing my ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time.

1 2 3 4 5 8. I don't like my compositions to be evaluated.

1 2 3 4 5 9. I see writing as having no more value than other forms of communication.

1 2 3 4 5 10. I feel confident in my ability to express my ideas clearly in writing.

1 2 3 4 5 11. I see writing as an outdated, useless way of communicating.

1 2 3 4 5 12. In my major or in the field of my future occupation, writing is an enjoyable experience.

1 2 3 4 5 13. I seem to be able to write down my ideas clearly.

1 2 3 4 5 14. Writing is a beneficial skill.

1 2 3 4 5 15. Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience.

1 2 3 4 5 16. I have a terrible time organizing my ideas in an essay.

1 2 3 4 5 17. When I have something to say I'd rather say it than write it.

1 2 3 4 5 18. An ability to write will be worthwhile in my occupation.

1 2 3 4 5 19. I enjoy writing.

1 2 3 4 5 20. I'm no good at writing.

For scoring, add the responses to items 1, 2, 4, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, and 19; then subtract the responses to items 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 16, 17, and 20 (Reigstad and McAndrew 38).

Appendix B
Composition Opinionnaire

Please indicate on the scale provided how you feel about each statement. One shows strong disagreement with the statement, three an uncertainty, and five a strong agreement.

SECTION I--Importance of Standard English

1 2 3 4 5 1. In order to avoid errors in sentence structure, weak students should be encouraged to write only short, simple sentences.
1 2 3 4 5 2. High school students should be discouraged from using figurative language because their efforts at metaphor so often produce cliches.
1 2 3 4 5 3. Students should not be allowed to begin sentences with "and," "or," "for," or "but."
1 2 3 4 5 4. Students should be discouraged from using the first person pronoun in their composition.
1 2 3 4 5 5. The English course for junior high school should include a research paper so that students can learn how to use the library and source materials for papers in their own courses.
1 2 3 4 5 6. Correct English is established by logical grammatical relationships within the language.
1 2 3 4 5 7. Students' oral language should be corrected so that the forms will appear in their writing.
1 2 3 4 5 8. High school students who are able to be corrected so that the forms will appear in their writing.
1 2 3 4 5 9. Students should be required to prepare written outlines before they begin writing expository papers.
1 2 3 4 5 10. There is little research evidence that knowledge of grammar and usage will produce improvement in students writing. *

SECTION II--Importance of Defining and Evaluating Tasks
1 2 3 4 5 1. Successful writing is achieved only if all themes are carefully corrected by the teacher.
1 2 3 4 5 2. Grades are the most effective way of motivating students to improve their writing.
1 2 3 4 5 3. The major obligation of instruction in composition is to help students learn and practice the conventions of standard, educated English.
1 2 3 4 5 4. Every error on a student's composition should be indicated.
1 2 3 4 5 5. Assignments during the last two years of high school should require primarily expository writing.
1 2 3 4 5 6. Rhetoric as it is pertinent to the composition course concerns only the manner of writing, not the matter.
1 2 3 4 5 7. Grades are the most effective way of evaluating composition.
1 2 3 4 5 8. Students should rewrite each paper regardless of the number or kind of error.
1 2 3 4 5 9. By the time they leave high school all students should be able to distinguish clearly among the four forms of discourse: narration, description, exposition, and argumentation.
1 2 3 4 5 10. The major purpose of evaluating compositions is to guide individual student growth and development.*

SECTION III--Importance of self expression

1 2 3 4 5 1. Teachers should write all composition they assign students.

1 2 3 4 5 2. Compositions written in class should never be given letter grades.

1 2 3 4 5 3. Growth in written self-expression depends in part upon a wide range of first-hand experiences.

1 2 3 4 5 4. Composition programs in the elementary grades should be directed primarily at encouraging students to self-expression.

1 2 3 4 5 5. Writing assignments should be more extensive than the specification of a topic or list of topics.

1 2 3 4 5 6. Composition programs in the elementary grades should be designed primarily to help students learn to discipline their writing and develop awareness of accepted standards of good prose.*

1 2 3 4 5 7. Teachers should correct errors on students' papers.*

1 2 3 4 5 8. Strict conformity to rules of standard English inhibits growth in writing.

1 2 3 4 5 9. Students given freedom in composing will discover various types of writing for themselves.

1 2 3 4 5 10. Creative dramatization, role playing, and pantomime have little effect on written composition.*

SECTION IV--Importance of linguistic maturity

1 2 3 4 5 1. The experience of composing can and should nurture the student's quest for self-realization and his need to relate constructively to his peers.

1 2 3 4 5 2. The teacher-student conference can and should aid the learner in finding his strengths and encourage him in correcting some of his weaknesses.

1 2 3 4 5 3. The techniques of writing and documenting a formal research paper should be taught in high school to all college-bound students.

1 2 3 4 5 4. Student should have freedom in selecting the topics for their compositions.

1 2 3 4 5 5. Differing teaching approaches must be used for teaching factual writing or objectively oriented writing and for teaching subjectively oriented imaginative writing.

1 2 3 4 5 6. Growth in writing in the elementary school is enhance by a broad and rich program of literature.

1 2 3 4 5 7. Students should often "talk out" their compositions prior to the writing.

1 2 3 4 5 8. Able students tend to explore different forms and styles of expression and show more variation in quality from one written product to another than do less able students.

1 2 3 4 5 9. Grading a paper or a course with a single letter grade informs no one as to the values sought, whether those of style, content, mechanics accuracy, or a combination of the elements.

1 2 3 4 5 10. Students who speak freely, fluently, and effectively are generally good writers.

* responses to these items were reverse for scoring (Gere, Schuessler, and Abbott)